

## The Agent's Desire by Christiane Paul

The idea of the blurring of human and machine and the autonomous intelligence of inanimate matter has been fascinating us for centuries — from E.T.A. Hoffman's "The Sand-Man" (the story of the carpenter Nathaniel and his infatuation with the princess Olimpia who may or may not be a mechanical doll), Frankenstein, and the replicants of Blade Runner to Norbert Wiener's and J.C.R. Licklider's concepts of man-machine symbiosis and Donna Haraway's cyborgs.

In today's digital age, intelligent agents and knowbots have become the virtual incarnation of the dream about the autonomous intelligence of machines. Hailed as the personal assistants that make us smarter and despised as the invaders who destroy our privacy and imagination, agents and bots have become a major topic of discussion and in all likelihood, will have quite an impact on our culture and society.

Agents come in many different forms of intelligence and disguises, which ultimately define their beneficial or threatening aspects. The personal agent who lives on your hard drive, manages your files, watches your behavior and helps you out isn't a threatening creature. The agents who promise to filter and customize information for us and are capable of chatting with other agents and exchange information, however, also happen to transform us into digital sitting ducks. Attached to our data bodies, they can turn us into easy targets for marketing and advertising schemes.

It was the latter group that prompted Jaron Lanier to proclaim that "the idea of 'intelligent agents' is both wrong and evil" in his 1995 essay "The Trouble with Agents," later expanded into "Agents of Alienation." According to Lanier, the "monster problem" is that agents make people redefine themselves into lesser beings. Advertising turns into the art of controlling agents, while info-consumers see a cartoon version of the world through the eyes of agents that take a lowest-common-denominator approach to content and personal tastes: as Lanier puts it, "You're interested in Balinese ritual, therefore you're interested in travel, therefore you're interested in the Infobahn Travel Game Show!"

From Hoffman's Nathaniel to Blade Runner's Deckard, the trouble with agents (or human/machine hybrids) starts when they get entangled in the web of human desire. Chris.053 — the protagonist of Jenny Marketou's *Smell.Bytes* — may very well be the epitome of agent technology and the perfect counter-intelligence: driven by his insatiable olfactory desires, Chris sniffs out people (or rather their images) on the Internet and shamelessly invades their privacy by grabbing their images from chat rooms, breaking them down into algorithms that correspond to smells, and collecting the results in a stinky gallery. Chris.053 hints at the more sinister aspects of agent technology — from dataveillance and hacking to the invasion of privacy — and at the same time raises questions about the

relationship between sensuality and the imagination. It ultimately is Chris.053's desire that makes him more human and transparent than the average agent. Chris invites people to voluntarily participate in their own analysis by submitting their image, to become members of Chris' fanclub, and to send "smell cards" to their friends. Simultaneously playful and invasive, existing at the crossroads between attraction and threat, Chris.053 perfectly captures today's trouble with agents in the vein of his literary forerunners. Jaron Lanier saw early agents such as Microsoft's "Bob" as a proposition of a life of caricatured meaninglessness, sliding unintentionally into the grotesque. Intentionally grotesque, Chris.053 is a welcome answer and anti-dote to "commercial" agents like Bob.

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